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# MOVIE MAKER

The Cine and Video Monthly

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## RAY HARRYHAUSEN

MOVIE  
MODELLER  
WITH THE  
MAGIC TOUCH



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# the master of single-frame magic

**Ray Harryhausen, the renowned animator of monsters and fabulous beasts in miniature, talks about his exacting, but fascinating craft to IAN RINTOUL – a prize-winning amateur who is also no mean hand at making movies with models.**

**T**HERE CAN be few cinema-goers who have not seen some examples of his art. And his films, along with the work of other master movie makers, are discussed by students and studied frame by frame, while acting as inspiration to many amateur stop-motion enthusiasts and those who hope to make a career in special effects.

For *aficionados*, Ray Harryhausen has become as much a legend in his own lifetime as the fabulous characters and creatures he has painstakingly brought to life on the screen with his own special brand of model animation.

In his office, the ingenious creations from his films sit quietly in glass cupboards, as if waiting for the caress of their master's hands to bring them to life. To Harryhausen fans they are immediately recognisable. The duelling skeletons from *Jason and the Argonauts*, Dioklos the two-headed dog and the sinister Medusa from *Clash of the Titans*, sit side by side with the golden Minotaur from *Sinbad* and one of my favourites, the vicious Allosaurus from *One Million Years BC* – not to mention a miniature Raquel Welch!

## **Early interest in movies**

Now planning a new project, Ray spoke to me about his career and early interest in miniature cinematography. "I consider myself fortunate – I worked with Willis O'Brien – the initial impact of his 1933 *King Kong* will never be equalled. I recall as a young lad, like many others, coming out of the theatre reeling under the impact of the sights and sound of this classic film.

"I decided to find out as much as I could about the making of *Kong*, but in those days there was very little. Magazines sometimes printed diagrams and a lot of information was erroneous – like telling readers Kong was a 50ft mechanical model! Shades of what was to come forty years later when the remake of *Kong* was produced, and there was the speculation about a 'man in an ape suit' which I could not believe even then, although a description of Kong's roars being produced by recording a lion's roar and playing the results backwards had some truth in it.

"Years later, I was fortunate to work with O'Brien on *Mighty Joe Young* (1947). I did about 85 per cent of the animation on *Joe*, and although it did not have the story power





and range of *Kong*. I still count some of the sequences among my favourites."

Ray is presently working on a stop-motion film involving a prehistoric creature, and because I'm involved with a film featuring one of my own, the creations from that era are of particular interest to me. Viewing these models close at hand makes one fully appreciate the craftsmanship and attention to detail that can withstand scrupulous examination.

"They have to," Ray explains. "Some of the cinema screens are over 65ft wide, and an 18-in. model has to be able to stand that colossal magnification."

But that's only part of the problem; what about the movements of prehistoric animals? Nobody's ever seen one, but instinctively we imagine how they *ought* to move. "It's a feeling for the subject," he continues. "You can study the remains and construction of these great creatures, and perhaps visualise that they had certain motions, but the rest has

to come from the animator – logic plays a large part."

The stop-motion animation technique is a business that requires concentration and an ability to work for long periods without interruption and above all *patience*.

Ray often receives letters from people asking about getting into the profession. "I'm sure most of them don't realise the amount of sheer physical work involved – if they did, they might change their minds! Often the animator can walk miles in a day during an animation session, just going back and forward from the set to the camera to make each exposure."

Reflecting on his work, he says: "We have proved with our films [the 'our' indicating his co-producer Charles Schneer] over the years that there is a very large audience who want to be entertained by fantasy and mythology. Look how long Grimm's stories, Aesop's Fables and the Arabian Nights have survived. And it's not just children – many grown-ups want to come on the journey."

Along with their interest, audiences' curiosity grows and they become increasingly keen on getting a 'peek behind the scenes'. Gradually, over the years, Ray has revealed rather more than he might have wished, and one can respect his reluctance to give away too many 'tricks of the trade'. He strongly believes that an element of mystery should shroud his work. This, however, has not prevented lengthy specialist magazine articles speculating on how many of his effects are achieved. Eventually, there was a magazine devoted to his work, *RHFX*, and several versions of his own *Film Fantasy Scrapbook*.

In *Clash of the Titans*, one of MGM's biggest successes in 1981, gods and goddesses of the live theatre played their counterparts in mythology, and some critics were upset. Ray explained: "In the past, we have been criticised for using people who were not 'stars' in their own right and their performances did not match the quality of the special effects. For *Titans*, we used people of the calibre of Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith, Claire Bloom and they say – 'Why are you using such talents in the fantasy film?' Perhaps we will never win this one. The main thing, I guess, is that the public come to see the films."

And they do – but as well as the cinema, television has opened up a new audience for the man whose name has become synonymous with primeval worlds, fantasy and adventure.

Ray has been using combined model and live action techniques since 1952, a system he calls Dynarama. A model is set up on an animation table with a foreground to match the live action background 'plate' (actually a strip of film carrying a piece of live-action which is advanced frame by frame).

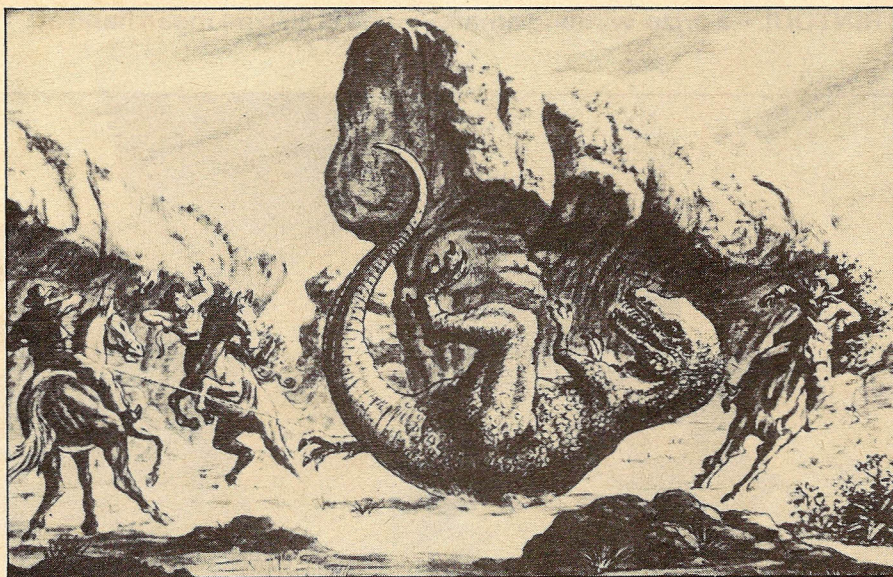
If, for instance, a fight is to be staged with a caveman throwing a spear into a prehistoric monster, the caveman would be filmed against a suitable background (*i.e.*, rocks) throwing a spear at an imaginary monster. This processed film will be threaded in a specially adapted projector and the first frame shown on a rear projection screen behind the miniature table-top set. The monster will be lit in the same style as that used for the live-action shot behind, and a foreground of small rocks would be used to simulate those in the background plate.

The animation camera is lined up on the model set and screen, ensuring that the perspective of the set is properly matched to that in the background shot, and a frame will be exposed. Before the next one is taken, the animator will adjust his model to react with the caveman on the background film. As the spear leaves the caveman and reaches the monster, a similar model spear will take over and enter the creature's body. The monster will then fall over; the caveman on the 'live' footage will, of course, have anticipated this and reacted accordingly.

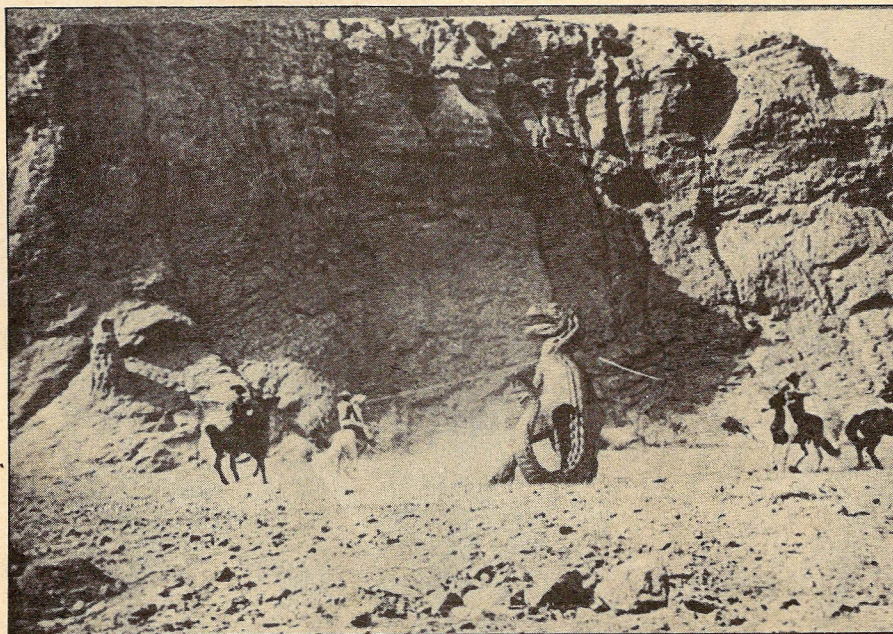
This is a simplified description of the technique and Ray uses much more complicated methods which involve split-screen and matte work with an optical printer.

#### How the models are made

Explaining the creation of a new figure for animation work, the Master gave a 'simplified' description of the process. Having sculpted the model in modelling clay or plasticine, he makes a plaster cast in two half sections. A suitable armature (a high-precision stainless steel ball-and-socket joined skeleton) is placed in the mould, which is sealed and then



The picture above shows Ray Harryhausen's original sketch for a key scene – the roping of the dinosaur by cowboys – in *The Valley of Gwangi*. Below can be seen the shot as it appears in the finished film, a remarkable example of live-action and model work combined by travelling matte and optical printing techniques. (By courtesy of Ray Harryhausen)





liquid latex rubber is poured in. Later the mould is opened and the model removed, finished and painted.

This process allows other models of the same character to be remade easily in case of damage or the need for two animators to work with the same character on separate elements of the film. The aforementioned armatures are very expensive to make, as they have to permit the model to be accurately re-positioned for each exposure, and sometimes they are reused for other similar models.

Talking about short cuts in film making, Ray reaffirmed his dislike for men-in-ape-suit-type pictures, maintaining that most audiences can spot them immediately, thus any illusion the movie is trying to create is broken. Mind you, it's not difficult to understand *why* they are used – it's a very difficult thing to animate people or animals seen in real life because they have to move in a familiar way. "In the case of Pegasus the Winged Horse, we not only had to have the model walking as a real horse, but 'flying' as well. Obviously we used a real horse for close-ups, but conversely we had to use a miniature hero (Perseus) beside it on the ground and on its back when flying."

The skill of the professional and the enthusiasm of the hobbying amateur sums up the character of Ray Harryhausen. He recalls his teenager days when he made his first animated models with wooden joints, and his initial elation at watching his first efforts move on the screen. "It's still there for any beginner to experience – amateur film makers with single-frame devices on their cameras and a little imagination can make a start. Remember, it needs patience, but a few hours concentrated effort can bring interesting results. Even if you make every mistake in the book and have to start over again, it will be worth while. I guess there's no easy way into the profession. This field is fairly small in relative terms, but if you apply yourself and send your films into competitions and festivals – who knows what might happen?"

A quiet, friendly individual, Ray speaks modestly of his beginnings, his early success arriving with a series of fairytales which he says are still being shown. His first 'break-through' film where he is credited with creating special effects is *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, a modestly-budgeted production released by Warner Bros, which proved to be a money-spinner for the company and allowed Ray to move on to other

projects, including *It Came from Beneath the Sea*.

*20 Million Miles to Earth* and the stunning *Jason and the Argonauts* were where Ray would be on his favourite ground – mythology. Some of his most famous sequences are contained in this latter film – the screaming Harpies, Talos and the duelling skeletons, to name but a few examples.

One of my favourite Harryhausen films is *The Valley of Gwangi*, a movie that did not do as well at the box-office as one could have wished. In Britain it was released in a double bill with an indifferent Western, but nevertheless, Gwangi himself came over as one of the meanest of Ray's creations.

The film was fashioned from a story that Willis O'Brien had hoped to do in the Forties, and one of its best scenes involved cowboys on horseback roping the snapping Gwangi. The result is a triumph of stop-motion photography, live-action composites, matte work, film editing and sound effects. Often shown on television, this scene is well worth watching for, as is the 'good and evil' sequence when Gwangi meets an untimely end in a Mexican cathedral.

"With 24 frames of film for every second, the going can be pretty slow, especially if you are working to a deadline with a big budget picture like *Clash of the Titans*," admits Ray. "People forget that it's a business, and we have to worry about budgets and schedules. If we plan to shoot on a certain day with crew and actors and it starts to rain when we get there, we may have to shoot the required scene anyway – then we can have a problem matching the other material."

#### Fay Wray and 'Kong'

The conversation comes back to *King Kong* and Ray speaks affectionately about its leading lady, Fay Wray, who has become a good friend. They appeared together in Los Angeles this year for *Kong's* 50th Anniversary celebrations held in Grauman's Chinese Theatre – which was one of the cinemas to preview the original in 1933. Fay Wray apparently thought little of her role in *King Kong*, as in that same year she had made a number of other films including *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* and was simultaneously shooting another film – *The Most Dangerous Game* – on the same RKO lot, using many of the *Kong* sets!

It was not until the 1960's, when she

started to receive offers for personal appearances in chat shows and requests for stories about *Kong*, that she realised the impact the film had made over the years. Her other work almost forgotten, the film she thought least of was the one that would ensure her a place in cinema history.

Most people think of Ray Harryhausen as primarily an animator. However, seeing the superb charcoal sketches of scenes from his films, the sculptures cast in bronze and set designs, makes one realise that he could have become just as famous as an artist or sculptor. The charcoal sketches, highlighting scenes for a new film are very important to convey the essence of the project to film companies and producers. Works of art in themselves, these drawings convey the power and range of his imagination.

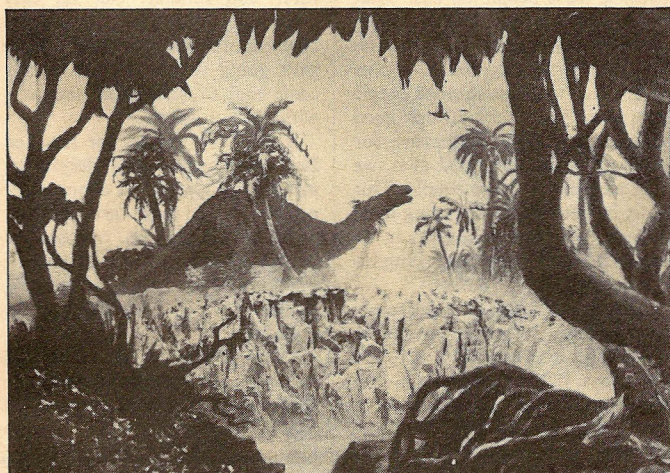
His work as an artist has been recognised, and many of his creations are regularly exhibited around the world, including a tour this year to Berlin and the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Ray is an admirer of the work of Gustav Doray, the 18th Century painter whose moody terrain portrayed in landscape paintings and line drawings created a style for many artists, and has acknowledged the influence of Doray's style on some of his own backgrounds and set decorations.

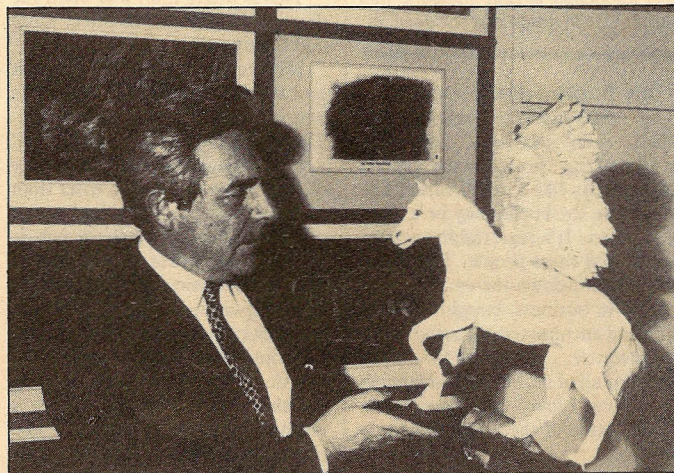
Very much in demand as speaker and lecturer, Ray is embarking next year on a series of talks at centres which will include London and Durham. As he takes several of his most famous creations 'on tour' with him, these events must be highlights in the calendar of anyone interested in Cinema and Harryhausen's work in particular. (We hope to be able to give details of these lectures later in the year – Editor.)

Summing up on his work, Ray says: "It's like being an amateur film maker in a way, when the whole effort in an animation film is the work almost solely of one person – thinking up what the scenes are going to be like, sketching them out, making the models or drawings, then photographing them frame by frame."

It has often been said that the best amateur movie makers are thoroughly professional in their approach, so it's certainly interesting – and satisfying – to learn that a top professional like Ray Harryhausen can also remain something of a true amateur at heart.



An early Harryhausen model set-up dating from the 1940's. The primeval forest setting and prehistoric monster suggest the Willis O'Brien influence which Ray freely acknowledges. (By courtesy of Ray Harryhausen)



Author Ian Rintoul examining with obvious admiration the Harryhausen model of Pegasus, the winged horse, made for *Clash of the Titans*.